

Changing strategic Trends in Student Leadership in public School system in Kenya

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ABSTRACT

Against the wider background of increasing interest in the improvement of management and leadership practices in public schools, this paper focuses on the involvement of students in leadership beyond the traditional structure of school prefects. It also seeks to show how the school administrators can be retrained in fresher insights into leadership and management in order to make their institutions responsive to changing trends in administration. Furthermore, the paper seeks to interrogate the prefect system of student representation in secondary schools, its process and outcomes. New ways of conceptualizing leadership are discussed in relation to students' roles as active agents in improving learning especially in light of the April 2001 educational legislation that prohibited school corporal punishment. The abolition of corporal punishment in schools as (Ng'ang'a 2002:4) has argued, has left a gap which cannot be filled and this has led to the prevalence of diverse disciplinary problems in schools. Schools are compelled to operate within the regulatory framework of the Ministry of Education which may at times conflict with their peculiar needs, situations and circumstances. To this end, schools are somewhat constrained in combating the rapidly escalating problems with discipline. Furthermore, parental

attitude toward educators and school authorities exacerbate the disciplinary control in schools due to parents' skepticism towards disciplinary measures. This paper proposes the idea of 'democratic governance' as one of the novel ideas that can make school system relevant to changing realities. It further introduces the concept of "Leadership by Students" (LbS) to underscore the fundamental need by education authorities to conceptualize a school system where each student is given a leadership role in the school as an important way of ending the prefecture system which is responsible for the school strikes and a skewed view of leadership where a few dominate the majority. This paper argues that a perception of leadership as a relational process of influence rather than a hierarchical power structure gives credence to the view that students' leadership is developed more within a climate of democratic governance than dictatorship. Schools and networks of schools are suggested as important sites for the enactment of leadership as influence through the lateral modalities of power such as negotiation and persuasion which may contest and change existing structures of student leadership. In recent years the term "student voice" increasingly has been

discussed in the school reform literature as a potential avenue for improving both student outcomes and school restructuring (Harber & Meighan, 1989; Harber, 1995; Ruddock & Chaplain, 1996). The concept addresses a core voice that has been missing in the discussion of school reforms - the dilemma of ownership. Student voice initiates public schools to reevaluate who gets to define the problems of a school and who gets to try to improve them (Trafford, 2006; Flutter & Ruddock, 2004; Apple & Beane, 1995; Chapman, 1995). A key challenge for policy workers is to understand how different school governance structures and educational reforms impact on the role of student leaders and most importantly on the ability of school leadership to provide effective teaching and learning, (Hargreaves, 2003). Since 2001, Zawadi Leadership Project in Secondary Schools under the auspices of Zawadi Counselling and Research Centre has been conducting research and seminars on LbS in 20 selected schools from Nairobi and its environs. These studies have found out that the school prefecture system in public schools is an important cause responsible for the rising cases of school strikes. These studies have adopted a multi-method approach including both quantitative and qualitative data analysis. This paper looks outward, focusing on the imperatives of student leadership rather than inward, on school heads and governing boards. (604 words)

Key Words:

leadership by students, democratic governance, educational governance, management and leadership practices,

negotiation, persuasion, school prefects, school restructuring, student voice.

A. INNOVATIVE STATEMENT

IN THIS PAPER, WE ARGUE THAT A LACK OF DEMOCRACY IN SCHOOLS COUPLED BY AN AUTHORITARIAN EDUCATION SYSTEM WHICH CREATES A SORT OF POLICE SYSTEM OF STUDENT GOVERNANCE IS THE MAIN CAUSE OF THESE SCHOOL STRIKES AND UNLESS THIS FACT IS ASSIMILATED BY EDUCATION POLICY MAKERS, THERE WILL BE NO END IN SCHOOL STRIKES IN KENYA. CONSEQUENTLY, THIS PRESENTATION IS A CONDENSATION OF RESEARCH AND TRAINING FINDINGS SPANNING A PERIOD OF 8-YEARS (2001-2009) THAT INTERVIEWED MEMBERS OF SCHOOL COMMUNITIES WHO INCLUDE: HEADMASTERS-ALSO REFERRED TO AS PRINCIPALS, TEACHERS, STUDENTS, PARENTS, MEMBERS OF BOARD OF GOVERNORS (BOGS), PREFECTS AND PARENTS. FURTHERMORE, THIS PRESENTATION PROBES THE PREVAILING SCHOOL CULTURE DEFINED AS “HISTORICALLY TRANSMITTED PATTERNS OF MEANING THAT INCLUDE THE NORMS, VALUES, BELIEFS AND MYTHS UNDERSTOOD BY MEMBERS OF THE SCHOOL COMMUNITY” ESPECIALLY AS IT PERTAINS THE ROLE AND PLACE OF STUDENT LEADERSHIP IN THE OVERALL SCHOOL LEADERSHIP AND MANAGEMENT STRUCTURE. THE RESEARCH QUESTION PERVADING THE ENTIRE SPECTRUM OF THIS DISCUSSION IS: HOW BEST CAN THE STUDENTS’ VOICE BE HEARD IN THE PUBLIC SCHOOL SYSTEM? AND THE TITLE FOR THIS INNOVATIVE PROJECT IS: “CHANGING TRENDS IN STUDENT

LEADERSHIP IN PUBLIC SCHOOL SYSTEM: INTRODUCING THE CONCEPT OF LEADERSHIP BY STUDENTS (LBS)

A. INTRODUCTION

“Democratic Management” is the new concept that ought to be incorporated by schools’ in order for them to fit in the “new school order realities” and in order for the students’ voice to be heard. The word “democratic” is used to stress the openness of schools and educational systems; the term “management” is used to underline the technical and instrumental dimensions of governing. We govern those things or beings, the behaviour of which cannot be predicted totally. We manage things or beings, the behaviour of which is easier to predict. When we govern, we negotiate, persuade, bargain or apply pressure, because we do not have full control of those we govern. When we manage, we tend to instruct and order because we think we have strong and legitimate power to do so. Thus, as schools are becoming more and more open institutions, rooted in specific local social and economic settings, and characterized by a complex array of different needs and interests, then governance rather than management is what should characterize relations with students. And since so many factors cannot be controlled by executive powers alone, an open and democratic approach is the only way to a successful and sustainable leadership in a modern school.

From 2001, Zawadi Counselling Centre has been conducting a series of researches and

training seminars on the minority Prefectorial System of governance and management in 20 secondary schools in Nairobi and its environs and how best to improve governance and management in schools. One of the ways in which Zawadi Counselling Centre has helped initiate this concept of democratic management in schools is through the LbS concept which involves all students in leadership and management of their respective schools. Furthermore, such an involvement lends credence to the concept of “the naked public square” where leaders are publicly elected by the majority students to represent the student body under an agreeable formulae as opposed to the culture of secret selection by the few (headmaster and teachers) using an unknown formulae where the select few student leaders make major decisions affecting every student becomes the norm. The LbS concept will make school strikes a thing of the past since dialogue born of democratic governance will be the in-thing in human relations. The LbS idea is an important aspect of the concept of “transformational leadership” which focuses on the importance of teamwork and comprehensive school improvement as an alternative to other modes of leadership. Transformational leadership is contrasted with instructional leadership which encompasses hierarchies and leadership structures and usually excludes teacher development, and, transactional leadership which is based on an exchange of services for various kinds of rewards that the leader controls, at least in part. Advocates of school reforms also usually advocate altering power relations. The problem, explain (Mitchell &

Tucker, 1992) is that we have tended to think of leadership as the capacity to take charge and get things done. This view keeps us from focusing on the importance of teamwork and comprehensive school improvements. Thus, “instructional leadership” is “out” and “transformational leadership” is “in”.

The research literature identifies productive high schools as those that educate all of their students well, have a clear vision of their teaching and learning goals, and take action on those goals (Silins et.al., 2000). They also have high expectations for all students. Productive high schools are built on humanized, intellectual relationships for learning. Students are viewed as individuals and they know that the adults in the school care about them both personally and academically. This way of viewing students is reflected by a number of local private secondary schools most of which do not have this Prefectorial System. These private schools are used as control group in **Zawadi**. Research has shown that school strikes are more pronounced in “prefects run schools” than in “non-prefects run institutions”, where student voice is respected, acknowledged and encouraged (Mangi, Otieno & Ng’ang’a, 2003:30). The concept of democratic governance can benefit schools in primarily preparing young people to become participating, democratic adult citizens. The LbS is in my view, one of the best ways to introduce the culture of democratic governance in our schools.

B. PROBLEM STATEMENT

Research by Zawadi has revealed that many school principals may be ill-prepared to cede

ground for a new paradigm shift in student understanding of their role in running of schools. An aspect of this paradigm shift is the flexibility in the learning environment brought about by among other factors the rise and rise of Information and Communication Technology (ICT), which unfortunately seems escape the perceptions of minders of the traditional school system best represented by the public school system in Kenya. The developments in the growing ICT culture among especially secondary school and college going youth is significantly affecting the education culture defined in this context as “shared interpretations about beliefs, values and norms of a learning environment which affect the behaviors of members of a school community”. One area which is being affected by this ICT changes is the move from traditional learning environment focused on the teacher as deliverer of knowledge to new open learning environments focused on the learner as information seeker. The role of the teacher and learner change in the new learning environment; the teacher becomes: a facilitator, coach, guide and co-learner. The learner becomes; an information server, explorer, problem solver, co-teacher. (Grabinge & Dunlop, 2000:8-38).

In other words, the image of the teacher as the sole purveyor of knowledge is fast becoming obsolete and with it, the belief that a few select student administrators famously called “prefects” personify student leadership and can effectively instill student discipline and order. What is generally missing in majority public schools and some

private schools is the culture of a data driven school improvement which seeks to answer the ageless question: is it good because we have been doing it for a long time, or is it good because we have tangible evidence of its worth? In other words, can data use improve education? Studies by Zawadi have shown that generally speaking unpopular “good and bright” students are often favored for the positions of school prefects by the school administration (headmaster and teaching staff). But the truth of the matter is that the popular “bad and less bright” students often have the sympathies of the students in general. And because of these sympathies, this category of un-selected student leaders, have the ability to unbalance the school order. Unfortunately, the school system as currently constituted has failed to recognize and utilize their hidden potential for leadership, and where administrators are concerned that their continued stay in school may disturb the status-quo, they have expelled them. The chasm between the traditional model of education and the emerging ICT based model of shared learning was clearly brought to the fore by the infamous school strikes of June 2008 where a reported 300 schools were rocked by violent strikes (Daily Nation, 2008).

What was striking in this national shame was that the mobile phone, a modern product of ICT, was a major culprit in the sense it was used to communicate the strike, student to student and school to school. But what is perplexing was the response by top education officials in explaining the reasons behind the strikes and the panacea for the same.

But even more worrying was the findings by David Koech, the chairman of Parliamentary Committee on Education. According to Koech, “drug use, insecurity schools and parents’ neglect of their children were some of the major reasons behind the strikes in schools”. Furthermore, the House Committee recommended radical changes in the education system which includes among other things, “pocket to be banked with the school to avert cases of drug abuse” (East African Standard, 2008). Earlier on Education Minister Sam Ongeru had introduced tough measures in schools which “banned the use of mobile phones in schools by students and ordered the removal of music systems and DVDs from school buses among other measures” (East African Standard, 2008). These measures are based on partial conclusion of the problem. Conclusions by top education officials failed to recognize the crucial role that can Subordinate Staff play to fuel skirmishes in schools. In fact, little attention has been devoted to the recognition of the office of Subordinate Staff in schools. The traditional triangle concept of describing key actors in a school as consisting of, Teachers, Students and Parents is misleading. Studies by Zawadi have noted the huge influence the Subordinate Staff (Supporting Staff) bear on the school system, given that they tend to stay longer as employees of schools as compared to the triumvirate of Teachers, Students and Parents. This aspect of ‘permanency’ by Subordinate Staff means that they understand better the school culture. And if this cooperation between the Subordinate Staff and students becomes a conspiracy to commit evil, the results can be

catastrophic. That is why there is need to reconfigure the triangle of relationships and include the Subordinate Staff as the fourth independent and critical element in the school architecture. To include this segment as a core member of the school community will affect education policies and could eventually become an important step in the democratization of schools. The success of the Zawadi Counselling Centre Leadership initiative was demonstrated during the infamous school strikes of 2008. All the 20 schools which have undergone this leadership and management for change programme did not indulge in this strike.

C. ADDRESSING THE PROBLEM

But how can schools contribute to the (LbS) initiative? From 2001, the Zawadi program conducted a series of researches and trainings in leadership and management in 20 selected schools within Nairobi and its environs. The total cost involvement from 2001-2009 was \$200,000 and involved 18-25 specialized personnel. Prior to the involvement with this secondary school project, we considered expanding the project to include primary schools, colleges and universities. But a lack of enough specialized personnel for such a mammoth project coupled by inadequate finances meant that we could only limit ourselves to secondary schools in Nairobi. The selected schools were grouped in *four* groupings: schools from rich neighborhoods; schools from Eastlands neighborhoods; schools from slums; private schools. Another criterion was based on gender considerations. Thus,

girls' schools were balanced proportionately with boys' schools. Three mixed schools were selected. Two major approaches were used: training seminars and research. In the initial pilot study in 2001, a focus group session was conducted in one selected school where the research was carried out. Ten principals participated in the exercise of which the main purpose was to highlight the essence of student leadership seen collectively as the entire student population and not selectively as in few student representatives chosen only by the principal and the teaching staff. In order to conduct the nomothetic research a questionnaire was designed and applied. The nomothetic deductive method is the one that is used by researchers who want to learn something about social regulations – things that apply to people in general (Hardin,1985).

For the purpose of empirical investigation (2001-2009), a total of 1000 students, 300 teachers, 150 members of BOGs of 15 schools, 85 subordinate staff and 200 prefects were included. To obtain information regarding the interviewees' perceptions and experiences of what ails the school system, a questionnaire was administered using the medium of the English language. The questionnaire was scored quantitatively by means of appropriate statistical techniques such as frequencies, percentages, analysis of variance (ANOVA) and chi square analysis, and included an open question that was evaluated qualitatively. The scoring of the questionnaire was done electronically. The reliability of the questionnaire was between 0.93 and 0.97 which may be considered as

very good. The ideographical research was carried out by means of focus group interviews, semi-structured interviews with principals, teachers, students, subordinate staff, members of boards of governors and prefects of schools that were involved in the 8-year study. to find more about the participants' experiences, thoughts, and general feelings regarding what they thought about the concept of LbS. In order to lend ethical consideration to the empirical study, certain measures have been considered. This was done by obtaining permission from all relevant stakeholders.

Our study conceptualized *four levels* of a successful implementation of the LbS initiative within a democratic governance model. At the *first level*, appropriately called the "Entry Point", there was need by school management to *recognize* and *accept* that a new paradigm of LbS is gradually and perceptibly replacing the old model of authoritarian and *militarian* leadership where age and seniority are taken for granted as acceptable substitutes for wisdom and know-how. In the *second level* of implementation, we recognized the growing importance of leadership and management practices in schools. Thus, we sought to reeducate the school administrators on the three salient principles of leadership and management, namely, cooperation, competition and conflict. At the *third level* is the development of human values and behaviors of mutual respect, rights and responsibilities and, above all, trust. At this *third level*, the school is seen as an important bearer of democratic values. It is an open school, with regular communication

with higher authorities to give them good grounds for future decisions. Student members in school councils or school boards are given special training in meeting procedures. In fact, by the end of the 4-year school cycle, each student must have served as a school leader at the various levels of leadership available in the school. The student leaders also get a budget of their own to run their offices. Both formal and informal consultations produces systemic and structured information flow and sharing of responsibilities even in difficult areas of budgeting, curriculum development, strategic planning, school-based teacher training, student self-improvement trainings, evaluation, and teaching. At the *fourth level* we propose that there be a deliberate reconstitution of the school prefect structure by setting up a *LbS-student council* where all students are represented, with a number of representatives for the student body meeting regularly, perhaps with a *chairman* and a *secretary* as the only leading positions. But the council can also be organized much more elaborately by having a *Senate* with *two representatives* from each class and chaired by the *Vice-president* and *The Cabinet*, led by the *President*, who has the executive power. *President* and *Vice-president* are elected by the student council without undue interference by the school principal or teachers. Their mandate comes from the *Senate* which is itself elected after every school term to give chance for as many students to participate in its deliberations. Then there is the *Court* which has *one* member from each class. The *Court* acts as mediator in conflicts between students and between students and teachers.

The objective of the Court is to reach consensus between conflicting parties. Members of the student council are given special training and support in their work by the school head. One of the outcomes of this system of student leadership is greater mutual respect and trust between teachers and students. Also, the teachers tend to see students more as equal partners in the learning process.

This research experienced four major drawbacks in the form of: limited financial resources; non-cooperation from some school heads, teachers, and BOGs; inability to meet the Parliamentary Committee on Education and top education officials; limitation in the generalization of the research findings given that this investigation was conducted in a certain geographical zone. How these bottlenecks were overcome is as follows: we were able to work on a shoe-string budget. For the obstinate principals, teachers and BOGs, sustained training seminars which were professionally conducted gradually thawed their resistance. We are currently making good progress in meeting the House Committee on Education and top education officials. In recent times we have been having a series of discussions with two potential donors signaling that there is hope that we might conduct country-wide research.

D. OUTCOMES

Before the program came into life, the situation in the schools involved in this study was one where there was a

preponderance of the traditional learning model where the headmaster is king and the rest, including teachers' are his/her acolytes, existing only to do his biddings. Some of the factors that have led to the success of the program include:

- the "easy to identify with" questionnaires and focus groups interviews;
- the spirit of confidentiality which even under duress we have chosen to uphold;
- the program's longevity and consistency which has created confidence among participants' and served to market the group to other schools;
- the practicality of the LbS proposal and its widespread acceptability among the student population;
- the high professional standards exhibited during the seminar trainings and by the research environment;
- the moral and ethical dispositions by members of our team;
- being known and recognized by the relevant educational officials.

E. LESSONS LEARNT

This program has taught us valuable lessons. Initially we made the mistake of thinking that because we understood the problem clearly, the schools will follow suit and immediately there will be a revolution. We now know better. The process of influencing a change of policy which must deliberately

involve all the stakeholders in the education sector is as convoluted as it is necessary. Again, we made the mistake of believing that training seminars are enough in changing thinking and relating patterns among people. Now we know better. Humans are a complicated lot and in our African-Kenyan experience of ethnicity and politicization of all sectors of work, every initiative, every person, every word and gesture is judged on the basis of the ethnic backgrounds and/or political affiliations of the initiators of a program and not on the merit or lack of it of a particular initiative. And no institution is so riddled with this cancer as the school system. We have also on the need to include and cooperate with like-minded organizations for peer review reason. Initially when we begun, there was virtually no organization, at least in Nairobi and its environs, that was directly involved in conducting research and training. In terms of recruiting personnel for research and training undertaking we have learnt not to recruit based on what appears on the CVs, but to subject candidates to both written and field work experience in order to gauge their suitability for the task. The program was publicized by word of mouth. The overall aim of the program is to have the community own the ideas and then take charge of their own destiny.

F. SUSTAINABILITY

The development of LbS within democratic governance will ensure that our program nourishes learning and creates conducive learning environment. In determining the sustainability of this our program we note the following significant weaknesses

regarding the education sector vis-à-vis the development of student leadership: lack of clear definition of good student leadership program in secondary schools in particular and schools in general; inadequate preparation programs for students in leadership and management; absence of collaboration between schools and higher education institutions, public and private sectors; absence of a national sense of cooperation in preparing student leaders. The Zawadi consultative team has just finished drawing the Action Plan for our program for the next 5-years phase (2011-2016) where we have comprehensively discussed how to tackle the preceding “significant weaknesses”. Broadly, the Zawadi Leadership Project 2011-2016 Action Plan (Ng’ang’a & Otieno: 2010) proposes a five-pronged approach in addressing the LbS concerns: Active, sustained, and constructive engagement with Parliament; Ministry of Education and other stakeholders in the education sector; media, church and international NGOs involved with education. The focus is to agitate for the change of policy to allow the wind of democratic governance to sweep through the school system and obtain for students a more active role in leadership and management of their schools. I will argue how the LbS could be replicated or adapted in other organizations or settings in line with the seven principles of sustainable leadership by Hargreaves and Fink (2006), which borrow from the environmental and corporate sustainability literature to frame sustainable leadership in terms of energy restraint, renewal, and release. The seven principles by are as follows: Sustainable leadership

creates and preserves learning that lasts and engages students intellectually, socially and emotionally; Sustainable leadership secures success over time. The challenge is to let go, move on and plan for one's own obsolescence; Sustainable leadership sustains the leadership of others; Sustainable leadership addresses issues of social justice and is an interconnected process; Sustainable leadership develops rather than depletes human and material resources. It develops all its students rather than lavishing rewards on selecting or rotating a few already proven stars; Sustainable leadership develops environmental diversity and capacity; Sustainable leadership undertakes activist engagement with the environment. It develops sustainability by how the school leadership sustains itself and others around it to promote and support learning.

The practical part to these principles which guides the successful implementation of the LbS idea is this: first and foremost create a platform/an assembly where all the students can without inhibitions voice their concerns guided by the democratic ideals of Listening, learning and transforming. Again as in my preceding conclusion, the concept of LbS will ensure that schools become centers of creativity and innovation guided by the undying principles of freedom, democracy and individuality. By using the LbS idea, schools will become centers of participative decision making where power is consensual and facilitative manifested through others instead of over them. (Leithwood 1992 & Sigor 1992).

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The human person is multi-dimensional and cannot be defined unilaterally without risking to devalue him and to consider him inconsequential to the structures and systems he is supposed to annihilate, create and re-create in his search for what is meaningful within his historical and cultural contexts. The public school system as currently formulated and practiced in Kenya does not respect the collective student voice which is swamped under a traditional, daddy-is-always-right system of doing things with a small class of student leaders famously called prefects expected to represent student leadership abilities as a collectivity. The LbS initiative is an attempt to change this way of conducting student and school affairs. Furthermore, the promotion of holistic education and learning has in recent times become the buzz-word among educationists keen on changing the current state of affairs where student voice is muzzled prompting the venting of student anger through devastating strikes. Bronfenbrenner & Evans (2000:115-125), have introduced the five-system bio-ecological model to explain this multifaceted nature of human interactions. These five systems include: *Microsystem* (refers to family, peers, school, roles and relationships in the immediate environment); *Mesosystem* (relationship between home, schools, neighborhood, child care centres); *Exosystem* (community health services, parks, recreation centres, informal groups); *Macrosystem* (ideology, values, laws, regulations, customs and culture); and,

Chronosystem (includes all aspects of time and how they impact on development).

Analysis of the questionnaire responses from the interviewees in relation to student participation in leadership and management conducted by Zawadi Leadership Project from 2001 to 2009 reveal the following dimensions which indicate well functioning schools. These are: *Trusting and Collaborative Climate* -The extent to which the school's climate and culture is one that supports collaborative work, sharing of information and open communication; *Taking initiatives and risks*-The extent to which the school leaders and school structures support experimentation and teachers, student and supporting staff feel valued and rewarded for taking the initiative; *Shared and Monitored Mission*-The extent to which teachers and students especially participate in all aspects of the school's functioning, including decision making and review, sharing a coherent sense of direction and acknowledging the wider school community; *Professional Development*-The extent to which staff draw on available knowledge and skills to continuously improve their performance; *Vision and Goals*-The extent to which the principal works toward whole staff consensus in establishing school priorities and communicates these priorities and goals to students, staff and supporting staff giving a sense of overall purpose; *Culture*-The extent to which the principal promotes an atmosphere of caring and trust among staff, sets a respectful tone for interaction with students and demonstrates a willingness to change his or her practices in the light of

new understandings; *Structure*-The extent to which the principal establishes a school structure that promotes participative decision making, supports delegation and distributive leadership and encourages teacher and student council autonomy for making decisions; *Intellectual Stimulation*-The extent to which the principal encourages staff to reflect on what they are trying to achieve with students and how they are doing it; facilitates opportunities for staff to learn from each other and models continual learning in his or her own practice; *Individual Support*- The extent to which the principal provides moral support, shows appreciation for the work of individual staff and takes their opinion into account when making decisions; *Performance Expectation*-The extent to which the principal has high expectations for teachers and for students and expects staff to be effective and efficient.

The foregoing is the essence of the public school restructuring process which ultimately does the following:

- {1} Develops a vision that unites projects;
- [2] Identifies outcomes that will be assessed;
- [3] Obtains the active support of the community;
- [4] Redefines the role of principals from power wielders to facilitators;
- [5] Changes the basic organizational practices to better meet the needs of at-risk students. (4, 409 words)

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